

Address by Thomas P. McElroy, Jr.
At the dedication of the Audubon Collection
Palm Beach County Library
Summit Boulevard
West Palm Beach, Florida
Thursday evening,
April 17, 1980



(Recognition of those present)

This is indeed a happy day for all of us--for the Audubon Society of the Everglades, for library personnel, and, hopefully, for all citizens of Palm Beach County.

This occasion is the fruition of three year's work and made possible through the persistence and cooperation of many people. It would be impossible to mention the names of everyone who has assisted in some way, but there are a number of people who should be recognized for their efforts in helping make this day possible.

In the very beginning, when the query came from the Merrill Trust concerning our Audubon work, it was Mike Burkhardt and Marge Eaton who used their expertise in formulating a presentation on our behalf. They did such an outstanding job that a check for \$10,000 was received promptly. And then there were those of us appointed as a committee to decide how we could best use this money for the benefit of the community and at the same time further the Audubon cause. I think of meetings with Pat Gleason, Mary Nye, Marge Eaton, and Mike Burkhardt. It was this group that brought the decision for an Audubon library collection to the board of directors for approval.

And I must express my appreciation to Cynthia Plockelman and Paul Sykes who have been so instrumental in the selection of our basic books.

Perhaps most importantly, I want to express my appreciation to all library personnel, especially their board of directors and to Mrs. Perinoff and Mrs. Dunkle. They have been absolutely marvelous to work with.

Also, we gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and guidance from the Board of County Commissioners. Lest I have forgotten anyone, I hasten to add that it was the Audubon members and their programs of community service and concern that attracted the unsolicited attention of the Merrill Trust. So in reality, this day belongs to all Audubon members, now and in the past.

Why birds?

Since Audubon is interested in all facets of the environment, in ecology, and in the wise use of natural resources, why should we concentrate our efforts solely on the subject of birds? I assure you, our decision was not reached easily and there are numerous reasons for our being so definitive.

First of all, if, in this collection, we endeavored to cover the complete gamut of Audubon interests, we would dilute our strength and identity and the collection would be a mere supplement to an already outstanding library.

Second, the exploding interest in ornithology is world-wide. Today you can call your travel agent and book a birding trip to the Antarctic, New Guinea, the Amazon--to anywhere in the world. This great insurgence of interest is accompanied by an unparalleled quest for ornithological knowledge.

Why should this be so? Why should birds, of all the creatures on earth, so challenge man's psyche that he will fly across the continent in a private jet to observe one species, or travel to the outmost islands of the Aleutian chain with the hope of finding 4 or 5 species of birds that cannot be seen anywhere else on the North American Continent?

Clearly, the flight of birds is symbolic of freedom in the most literal sense.

The rhythmic grace of flight--songs, from the simplistic notes of alarm to the ethereal notes of an evening thrush--the delicate blending of colors--these qualities have long challenged the purveyors of canvas, the ballet, and the symphony. Yet, within the lives of birds lies a peak of perfection that cannot be emulated.

These are recognizable traits--reasons enough for following the lives of birds. But there is one other attribute that reaches beyond the aesthetic and beyond personal ego. We are now cognizant of the fact that birds are an integral part of the functional ecology of the world's landscape. Let us consider the Everglades as an example. How can we think of the egrets or the herons without thinking about the fishes upon which they feed? There is the gambusia, or mosquitofish, that becomes provender for the killifish, the sunfish, and the bass. But we cannot think of the gambusia and other small fishes without considering the great algal masses of periphyton which contain the eggs, larvae, nymphs, and hosts of tiny creatures and vegetative matter that cover the Everglades with their tonnage and become the basic energy source for a living community. Yet, we can go back even farther, to a wind-blown spore or a bacterium, or to the desmids and diatoms that cling to plant stems or rise to the surface of the water and begin this phenomenal ecological cycle.

Was it the herons or the egrets, the coots or the gallinules, that spread this vegetative and animal energy to every niche of the Everglades? How many hemlocks stand because of seeds distributed by warblers? How many oaks were planted by blue jays? Yes, birds are an ecological component of survival throughout the world.

We live in an era when the word "ecology" is becoming a household word. It is also an era when we are possessed with the philosophy that more is

desirable and bigger is better. We spend our monies and our energies building more roads and more condominiums to accommodate more people who will demand more roads and more condominiums in a never-ending cycle. Must we bury our country under a slab of concrete? Must we continue to be more concerned about the quantity of life rather than with its quality? If we continue to do so, we will be condoning the dilution processes of a decadent society.

Birds are often the barometer of environmental degradation. It took the nearly fatal decline of osprey, bald eagle, and brown pelican populations before we would admit that DDT was really poisoning our environment. If habitats must succumb to the push of concrete, species will continue to be endangered and many will disappear from the face of the earth.

E. O. Wilson, professor of science at Harvard University, looks upon the extinction of species as the greatest problem facing the world today. He estimates that one thousand of the five million species of animals, insects, plants, and mosses on earth will die out this year. He also warns that sometime within the next 20 years the extinction rate could swell to one species per hour.

For some unexplainable reason, the ruling bodies of the world yield to the pressures of self greed expressed in the time-worn cliches of economic development and political expediency. In blind ignorance, or for personal aggrandizement, they defy the very biological laws that hold this old planet together. The jungles of the world, oxygen producers for the entire planet, are being forested at an alarming rate under the guise of making room for agriculture. Yet, the exposed soil is thinner than the depth of a plow and can perpetuate itself only beneath the canopy of the living forest. Within the near future we may well refer to the Amazon desert rather than the Amazon jungle.

The increased use of high carbon and sulfur fuels brings us acid rains that are gradually destroying the fresh water fishes of the world. And we pollute the oceans with our wastes abating their ecological functions.

The extinction of a species, whether it be bird, animal, insect, or plant, can in almost all cases be traced to the destruction of habitat. Problems of such magnitude pose a rather ponderous question: How much environmental degradation will humanity tolerate? When will we say enough is enough and draw a line that will establish environmental stability? That such a line must be drawn is a known biological fact that we keep pushing into the future. If and when this decree is heeded, we can but hope that the timing will be such that the next extinct species will not be the one known as mankind.

Of one thing we can be certain: When the white of egrets is no longer mirrored in the dark waters of the Everglades, when the crows no longer hold caucus by an Ohio cornfield, when the clatter of wintering geese can no longer be heard in the back bays of Virginia lowlands, an aesthetic and biologically important part of the American landscape will have disappeared from this earth.

The great libraries and the books contained therein are the repositories for the accumulated knowledge of the world. And, they serve as cornerstones for our educational processes. I am thoroughly convinced that only through the educational process can we find any hope of developing an environmental ideology. Land developers, chambers of commerce, manufacturing association, and political pork barrelers are riding a gravy train leaving a despoiled land in their wake. They are so deeply entrenched that only they can change the course and they are not about to do so. Why should a child be allowed to graduate from elementary school or high school without a thorough knowledge of the environmental and ecological principles necessary to support life on this earth? Are these principles not equally important as those of math, or history, or language? Without a livable environment, all else is for naught. When we educate a

complete generation in this manner, perhaps then we can foresee an environmental ethic by which mankind can survive.

And now, I would like to offer a challenge--a challenge that involves nearly everyone here and many who are not here.

I look upon this collection as a beginning--a beginning that could be expanded into one of the finest ornithological collections to be found anywhere. To date we have spent about half of our allotted funds. We are in the process of spending a considerable amount of the remainder. Obviously, we cannot keep our collection up-to-date with a diminishing fund. Therefore, I challenge the Audubon Society of the Everglades to initiate the mechanics and promotion of a trust fund necessary for the continuance and future expansion of this collection. I challenge the county officials and library officials (and again, the Audubon Society of the Everglades) to include a separate and complete Audubon Room in their plans for future expansion of library facilities. With the continued cooperation, such as we have had on this first endeavor, I am certain that such efforts could end only with a collection that would be the envy and tool of ornithologists everywhere. In addition to serving our people, it could bring Palm Beach County recognition throughout the world.

In conclusion, we might ask a couple of simple but almost rhetorical questions: What is a bird? We could be quite crass and reply in the strictest dictionary terms. Or, we could look again to the aesthetic and to the biological implications of human survival. What is a book? If the knowledge we seek is to be found in the study and conservation of the outdoor community, then there must be a repository for such knowledge so that it can be shared with others now and in the future. It is with this hope we give this collection to the citizens of Palm Beach County.

Again, I would like to thank everyone who has helped make this day a reality and a success. Thank you.